

F 2/5 History Mike P. Hernandez, USMC Retired

My Experience in Vietnam:

Before Stepping onto The Asian Continent

After a 30-day voyage across the vast Pacific Ocean in a World War II style transport ship, the seasick cargo of humanity filled the landing crafts that were waiting to take us to the Danang seaport. As the crafts headed towards the shore, we began to sing the Marines Hymn, for the shuttle felt like we were reliving a page from Marine Corps history. We had embarked on the transport ship, USNS General Gordon APA, on February 9, 1967 in San Diego, California; sailed up the California coast to the San Francisco Bay to pick up some U.S. Army troops, and then set sail to the Republic of South Vietnam. After the Army troops disembarked at the Saigon port we sailed north to Danang, arriving March 9, 1967.

The trip began eight months earlier, in August 1966, when I enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in Abilene, Texas. Abilene, located in west central Texas between Dallas and El Paso, had been my home since I was 10 years old. We had moved there from my birthplace in Merkel, Texas. My mother's parents had immigrated to the United States in 1911 from Aguas Calientes, Mexico. My mother was born in Pecos, Texas, grew up in south Taylor County where her parents worked for farmers and ranchers in the area of Mulberry Canyon. As a young girl she attended schools in the canyon. My father was born in Abilene, Texas. His dad had emigrated to the U.S. from Chihuahua City, Mexico during Mexico's Revolution. My dad's mother was born in Fort Stockton, Texas. My dad and mother were very familiar with our nation fighting in wars. My mother's brother had been killed in France during World War II and her older sister's husband sacrificed his life in the Pacific Theater during the war. My dad and his brother served in Europe; both were wounded in combat. When I enlisted as a proud second generation Mexican-American, I was carrying on my family's tradition of serving our country.

The airplane trip to San Diego, California recruit depot was my first flight. Up to my eighteenth birthday, I had ventured out of the West Texas area only on occasions to go to the Dallas-Ft. Worth and the San Antonio areas. Once we did venture out of Texas to nearby New Mexico. Two of my cousins and I had made plans to join the Marines on a buddy system. I had received my draft notice from President Lyndon Johnson and was slated to join the Army. I had ten days to join another branch of service. I rushed to the Marine Corps recruiter's desk along with my cousins to take the entrance exams. I was surprised that I was the only one that passed; so I was inducted alone.

In Country at Last

When I landed in Danang, South Vietnam, I was weak from 30 days of seasickness. The lower ranked Marines were not allowed to leave ship for fear of going AWOL. The trip had taken a toll on my 140 pound body. I felt drained and fatigued, no longer fit from the rigorous training in the hills and mountains of Camp Pendleton. On arrival at the Danang port we Marines were told that we were replacements for Marine units in I Corps. Half of the men were assigned to the 3rd Marine Division; they would be conducting operations near the DMZ. My half was assigned to the 5th Marines of the 1st Marine Division, headquartered in the Danang area. The “Fighting Fifth” was the most decorated regiment in America having a long history of combat dated back to World War I during the battle of Belleau Woods; island hopping in the Pacific during World War II; and again fighting the North Koreans and the Communists Chinese in Korea. I was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines—simply, “2/5”, located about 50 miles southwest at a firebase named An Hoa that I soon learned to pronounce “*An Waugh*”, the same way that the Vietnamese did.

A C-30 transport plane flew us to An Hoa on March 10, 1967. As a 0311 grunt I was assigned to Company F’s 2nd platoon. I met Fox Company’s Gunnery Sergeant Sam Jones when checking in. By every measure, Jones was a Marine’s Marine. I was never close to Gunny Jones, but his influence on the company penetrated sharply—even down to my private first class level. I recalled during one particular firefight with the VC when he stood straight up in the line of fire to direct our fire. He was unbelievable! (Note 1)

The war zone, comprised of the An Hoa valley and the mountains surrounding it, was huge—about 20 miles by 20 miles. 2/5 controlled all the US and allied combat activity in the zone. It was their Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR). The TAOR was centered on the An Hoa firebase and its airstrip. Its northern border was formed by the Song Ky Lam River that flowed eastward to the South China Sea. Our supply line from Danang to An Hoa cut across the river at Liberty Bridge near the Phu Loc 6 outpost. Antenna Valley formed the southern border. There were low mountains between An Hoa and the valley. The valley had rice paddies and villages with higher mountainous ridges further south. The western border contained the Song Tu Bon River separating 2/5’s TAOR from the Arizona Territory to the north; however, the southern portion of that border crossed the Song Thu River and included the Nong Son Coalmines outpost that overlooked the river. To the east was an abandoned French railroad and Go Noi Island. Strategically, the An Hoa valley was a potential avenue of approach for North Vietnam (NVA) divisions moving into the Danang area from the Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran just west of Antenna Valley. We grunts never understood “strategy”. All we knew was that the rice paddies and villages were infested with land mines and booby traps and that the Viet Cong (VC) could snipe at us anywhere we were from distant tree lines.

The battalion, consisting of Golf, Hotel and Foxtrot companies, conducted search and destroy operations. When not on a battalion-size operation, the companies rotated to Phu Loc 6 and the coalmines to conduct local operations such as providing security for mine sweeps of the truck route from An Hoa to Phu Loc, night ambushes, and day patrols. At the An Hoa firebase, companies manned the perimeter with listening post (LPs) at night and conducted pacification operations to win the hearts and minds of the nearby villagers during the day.

I would soon find out how soft I had become during the 30 days from California to An Hoa. I was still wearing my stateside issued boots on my first assignment when my platoon “humped” the ten miles from An Hoa to Phu Loc 6 (Liberty Bridge). My feet were very tender and I barely kept up with the pace. If I was to survive this war, I had a lot of toughening up to do.

Early Combat Experiences

My first patrol was with two squads from our platoon. I was placed next to the rear with a Lance Corporal to babysit me. We were north of An Hoa with rice paddies and villages dotting the area. Our patrol was to make a circular route from An Hoa, skirting the villages by the river and returning to An Hoa that afternoon. After reaching our third check point we began our final turn back to our firebase. We had to cross a large rice paddy lined with tree lines. The first squad had almost reached the far side of the paddy when the VC opened fire with automatic weapons. The point man in our squad was in the middle of the rice paddy and the rear was just starting to enter the paddy when all hell broke loose. We jumped off the rice paddy dike into the paddy that was knee deep in water. My mentor yelled out at me, "Keep moving! We have to catch up with the squad and not get bogged down!" I now know that is precisely what the VC wanted the men in the rear to do. Our squad managed to reach the tree line where the first squad had set up a defense line. There were no casualties. One Marine quipped, "That son of a gun wasn't kidding!"

After we reached the perimeter wire, my mentor came over and asked me if I was all right. Out of breath, I uttered, "Yeah." He gave me advice that I later passed on to many Marines, "Keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to aim". Later, I also added, "If you are on the tail-end of a column, run like hell". My first patrol mostly was reported "Mission accomplished; no medevacs". I would soon learn that it would not always be the case.

It wasn't long before I experienced my first episode where a Marine was killed in action. Our platoon was on rotation to man the An Hoa perimeter when our platoon leader advised us to get our gear and be in formation outside the Non Commissioned Officers' (NCOs) hooch right away. It was in the afternoon. We were told that a patrol had been ambushed in a village and they were under attack with casualties. It would be dark in a couple of hours and we had to go in and pull them out. Two tanks met us at the wire and we headed towards the Liberty road and veered off towards the east where the road soon turned northward. It wasn't long before we could hear gunfire and a report that there was a (Killed in Action) KIA and several Wounded in Action (WIAs). Corporal Eddie Roberts' squad went ahead in an attempt to reach the stranded Marines. Our squad was ordered to secure a landing zone (LZ) for a medevac chopper. After about thirty minutes the chopper landed and the dead Marine was loaded. I prayed that I would not have to see him on his way out, but I was in the line of evacuation and could not help looking at him. This was war, people die and I had witnessed my first taste of death. We were told that the Marine had not been in-country very long. It was still March 1967 and I had already experienced the inevitable. Instantly, I reflected back to the time that I was on the transport ship coming over to this foreign land, I had picked up a booklet on how to pray the rosary. I had responded to the rosary in group prayer ever since I had been able to speak. The rosary was said in church during the Lenten season and especially during funerals. From that day forward, seeing my first KIA in the field, I began to call on prayers to get me through a firefight, sniper fire, running through imminent danger to get to safety. When under fire, I felt a high pitch of anxiety. I would run across rice paddy dikes saying the Hail Mary or Our Father over and over again. I did not believe that there was a bullet with my name on it, but I would see Marines killed or wounded while I lived to see another day. On many occasions dirt would fly up as the rounds hit the ground nearby me or the trees would crack just overhead, snapping branches as bullets impacted. I was on many company, platoon and squad operations. We lost a lot of men. Often the wounded were medevaced not knowing if they would make it. We had this feeling of

not knowing who was next.

We rifle squad members don't always know the name of the operation we would be going on or purpose of the mission. The NCOs and company Commanding Officer (CO) would meet and they passed on the scoop to the squad leaders. All we troops would learn is that we're going to get up at 0-dark-hundred and prepare to jump off. Sometimes it's well known what is going on, particularly if we're going to escort and provide security for the mine sweepers before the supply convoy comes through or it's a company-size sweep through a particular section of our TAOR that we had been on before. Whenever the NCOs came to brief us on a sizeable operation we'd know it was big. That was the case when the NCOs came and briefed us on an operation where they described as a North Vietnamese Rest and Recuperation (R&R) center. We were to hump towards the hilly southeastern hills of our TAOR. Scoop had it that a large size North Vietnamese Army (NVA) element was camped there. We were to hump to the area and spring an element of surprise on them. It would be a raid! Our platoon was chosen to be on the point. We were all given an 81mm mortar rounds to carry along with our regular gear. Things did not start out well. The thick underbrush held us up. We had to hack out a trail with machetes. A call came up from the company CO, Captain Graham, wanting to know what the holdup was. Our platoon commander explained that, after a couple of hours, we began getting heat casualties and had to call in medevacs. We were all wondering if the element of surprise had been compromised. But the operation continued. The next morning we turned north. We moved along a deep gulley that provided cover from both sides of our approach to the NVA area. By mid-morning the point reported to halt and get down. He could hear voices on the other side of the hedgerow. Marines were sent to see if they could get close to see what was going on. There were some NVA around a camp having a grand old time. They were probably the outer security to a larger force. The 81 mortars were ordered up on a ridge overlooking the NVA position, they were to fire their mortars about 100 yards ahead of our charge to block the fleeing NVA. We were ordered on a skirmish line and we charge through the hedgerow. The NVA started running towards the blocking barrage. Many of the NVA did not make far as they were cut down as they tried to get away. We did not take any prisoners and the number of NVA dead was less than ten. Our company did not suffer any casualties. We stopped 50 yards from our mortar barrage and set up in a defensive position not knowing what to expect. We could hear what sounded like warning shots, but they weren't coming in our direction. We took up positions for the night halfway up on the western ridge. I was selected to go on listening post with two other Marines and a radio. This was not the first time I had been on LP, but it was the most unsettling of them all. The briefing by the NCOs two nights before said it all, no one was going to fall asleep on this LP. We all stared in the darkness, clicking the handset to affirm we were secure. I asked God to allow me see daylight. The next morning we turned towards An Hoa. We still had a lot of territory to cover, rice paddies, villages, before we hit the Liberty Bridge road. Several kilometers, we called "clicks", before we reached the road we began to received automatic fire from a tree line to our right. We kept "humping" or moving as fast as we could with our heavy loads of helmets, flak jackets, packs, weapons and ammunition. We fired at the tree line where the fire was coming from. The enemy fire was hitting just short of our column. We needed to reach An Hoa before dark. Our M-60 machine gun crew set up on a knoll and immediately starting firing back in earnest. When we reached the road, there were tanks, amtracs and six-by trucks to take us to An Hoa. The sun had started to settle by the time we entered the perimeter.

I participated in hundreds of patrols, night ambushes, mine security sweeps, perimeter watch

and listening posts. I also participated in a company in-country R&R at Danang's China Beach. On one occasion visited the eye doctor in Danang. During my eye doctor visit, I was waiting for the C-130 flight back to An Hoa, and decided to visit an Air Force club. Two air force guys offered me money for my jungle fatigues and one guy offered me two Johnny Walker fifths for my .45 pistol. All within 15 minutes!

Operation Union II

On May 27th the NCOs told us that Fox Company would join the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (1/5) in Operation Union II. We were "choppered" to the Tam Ky area to join the 1/5 in a two battalion sweep of the Nui Loc Son Basin. The basin was essentially a flat area with a river running through it. Assisting as a blocking force was 3/5, with elements of the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN). They had begun the assault on 26 of May. They were engaged with remnants of the 3rd and 21st North Vietnamese Regiments. On May 30th 1/5's, rifle companies, Alpha and Delta with Fox Company attached, began sweeping towards their objective, Vinh Huy Village. On 2nd of June, with Delta on the right and Fox on the left, we began to move across a 1,000 meter-wide rice paddy. The word was passed back along the squad that the bird dog plane—a small US Army single prop plane—overhead had spotted activity up ahead. Fox Company was on a hill overlooking the rice paddy. Suddenly a rifle exploded. Our 2nd platoon's point man was shot by NVA soldiers hiding below a large boulder. A medevac was called while Marines took care of the NVA by throwing grenades into the holes under the boulder. Soon Marines reported NVA soldiers running away from the hill towards the other side of the large rice paddy. From the top of the hill we fired into the rice paddy at the moving targets. We were able to drop several NVA as they made their dash. We were ordered to descend into the rice paddy. Once there we were to form a skirmish line to maneuver across the rice paddy. When we reached the base of the hill Marines began firing into grass mats lying in the paddy that contained more NVA. We inflicted several more NVA kills all along the base of the hill. I observed one NVA stand with his hands up. The Marine over him called out that he needed help. His M-16 had jammed. Another Marine rushed over and shot the NVA.

The 2nd and 1st platoons formed the skirmish line and began our movement across the paddy. The 1st platoon was on the right and the 2nd platoon was on the left. When we reached the middle of the rice paddy, 500 yards from the tree line objective, two NVA machine guns opened up. The initial burst of fire was deadly, killing many of our Marines. My squad was on the far left with a machine gun directly in front of us. To our right, our platoon commander 2/Lt. Kelsey raised on one knee and shouted, "Individual rushes!" As the Marines stood up more Marines were hit by the deadly fire. Our squad leader Tom MacDonald stood up along with another Marine to comply. We were raked with machine gun fire. MacDonald went down ahead of us, so we held our ground. The only protection that we had was a 12 inch dry paddy dike to cover us. The machine gun in front of us kept firing, hitting the top of the rice paddy dikes. During the rest of the day, we also experienced fire from our rear. We did not hear from MacDonald or the Marine that stood up. Mortar rounds hit the tree line ahead. We could not distinguish if they were friendly or enemy. In the late afternoon, F-4 Phantom jets began to drop their payload behind the far tree line. Debris from bamboo trees, dirt and vegetation rained on our position. To our right we could hear a Marine's cry, "Help me, I don't want to die". After an hour the voice went silent. The machine gun emplacement in front of us continued to pepper us.

The afternoon dragged on. Finally the sun began to set. MacDonald came crawling back to our position. He told us that we had to get back to the hill behind us—the same one we started from. We asked him about the other Marine who went with him. He stated that he was dead.

Before we began to turn back, several NVA soldiers appeared at the tree line. One of them had one of our M-60 machine guns. Brown from Tennessee, who had been to our right, yelled, “Let me shoot him first.” We all saw the NVA drop and we began crawling back to the hill, staying low to avoid the machine gun. We found a depression on the left side of the paddy and we were able to hurry our withdrawal. We passed several dead Marines on the way. Getting close to the base of the hill, another machine gun opened up as we popped up to reach the perimeter. We yelled, “We’re Marines”. “C’mon up” was the reply. Darkness fell over the battlefield by the time the four of us reached the perimeter. We had no idea of the extent of the situation. On top of the hill there were wounded, but no one looked familiar, it was now dark. MacDonald advised us to stay put. I crouched next to the large boulder where the NVA had shot the Marine that morning. There were choppers coming in picking up the wounded late into the night. Word got around that NVA patrols were out in the rice paddy shooting our wounded.

The next morning we went down to the base of the hill and Gunny Green and some Staff NCOs were there. He ordered us to go into the paddy and pick up our Marines. He stated that the area had already been swept by a Marine unit and we shouldn’t encounter any hostilities. He added that if we ran into trouble to get back to the hill. The paddy was where we found the company casualties. Sgt. Eckerly was lying there dead with his shotgun beside him. We found our 3.5” rocketman, Robert Hernandez, dead. Towards the tree line, 2/Lt. Kelsey was dead, lying half way in an trench, Monfils, Bryd, Driscoll, Frances, Capt. Graham and others . We found Capt. Graham faced down, and someone said not to move him because the NVA might have booby trapped him. Ignoring the warning, another Marine and I grabbed one arm and turned him over. We gathered the Marines and waited for a chopper to pick them up. We saw to the right some Marine officers and media cameras. The officers were being interviewed, describing the battle the day before. We were able to walk over to the machine gun emplacement that had pinned us down. It was a seven foot hole with a tunnel leading back to the village at the bottom. At the top was a sitting position to fire the weapon. The gunner would fire his weapon, drop to the bottom during an airstrike, then pop back up and fire. After cleaning-up the battlefield all day, we survivors were emotionally and psychologically exhausted.

The few of us who remained were attached to another company and we set up a perimeter to the left of the depression where we had made our withdrawal the day before. I was sent out on an LP that night. We could hear Vietnamese chatter coming from another village in the distance. Everyone remained on high alert throughout the night. The next morning a chopper came to pick us up for a trip back to An Hoa. Gunny Jones had sent the chopper for us to get back to our area. There were very few of us. No one spoke. When the chopper landed at An Hoa, Marines at the firebase just stood in silence. We had lost so many; 30 Marines and sailors had been killed. We had all been traumatized by the events of the past two days. The once proud Fox Company no longer existed.

Operation Union II will forever be etched in my mind. (Note 2)

Recovery

Back at An Hoa, the 2nd Platoon began to receive replacements. They started to fill the ranks. I was assigned to Cpl. Eddie Roberts’ squad. Roberts had not participated in Union II because he

was recovering from punji stick injuries. He lost all of his squad in Union II and he was mourning the loss of so many friends. Other replacements arrived. Joining us were M-60 gunners John Moreno, Melvin Newlin and Gold. The new grunts were Figueroa, Sgt Maloney, Chris Brown, Samuels, Smith (Smitty), King, Cole, Brown and Wise. L/Cpl. Manciaz, who had been wounded by a booby trap along with 2/Lt. Kelly and others before Union II, was back. I had taken the M-79 grenade launcher from Manciaz when he was wounded; it stayed with me in my new squad. I liked the launcher, besides, I did not trust the M-16. I had qualified as sharpshooter at Camp Matthews with the M-14. To me, the 14 was more reliable than the M-16. Also, coming on board was L/Cpl John Muth. Muth was a tall lanky blond haired kid from California. His dad had been a lifer in the Corps and had fought in Korea. Muth slung his M-16 at belt level, pointed it with the muzzle downward while on patrol, with his hand on the gun handle, his thumb ready to switch to automatic fire at any given second. Always alert in the field, he was a gunslinger on the prowl. Seeing all the new replacements, my thoughts took me back to Staging Battalion at Camp Pendleton in January 1967, when a veteran Marine quipped, "I've been to Vietnam, not all of you will make it back".

Nong Song Coal Mines

June was coming to an end; the company had been conducting routine assignments, perimeter watch, mine sweeps, day patrols, to get us moving again. The company was scheduled to rotate to the coalmines in July, we were looking forward to leisure in the sun. Nong Song was a village along the Song Thu Bon River. Behind it was a very steep hill that almost looked like a volcano. When the French occupied Vietnam over 20 years earlier, they mined coal from that hill. For us, Nong Son duty was mostly perimeter watch. Villagers would come up and pick up laundry and we'd buy sodas.

On July 3rd we settled in with the 1st Platoon on the mountain top, the 2nd in the mid-level position and the 3rd platoon down by the river. On the night of the 3rd, things began to pop around 11:30pm. All of a sudden, the top lit up and big explosions could be heard. We were informed that the 1st platoon was being hit. 2/Lt Martin organized relief squads from the 2nd platoon. My squad started hustling up the road from the mid-level position. Someone warned, "Get off the road! The VC might have an ambush set up." We veered off to the right and climbed the side of the mountain grabbing shrub limbs and rocks as we pulled our way up. I was the point man going up. When we reached the top we encountered burning bunkers, exploding ordinance, debris scattered all around. I got into the trench immediately while the rest of the patrol followed close behind. 2/Lt Martin came up, we formed a defensive perimeter in case of a counterattack. If there were still VC on top, they were on the other side. Firing was sporadic, no way of telling the location of the defending Marines, if any. The ammo dump kept exploding at short intervals. It appeared that the defenders had beaten off the last of the invaders. Bunkers continued to explode, illumination flares lit up the night sky. The U.S Army outpost, across the river, were firing howitzers at the retreating enemy.

The rest of the early morning action was to set up perimeter. By daylight there were dead VC in the trenches and scattered on the grounds. The dead Marines were gathered and covered with ponchos. The 1st platoon had lost six dead and several wounded. The VC ransacked the bunkers. Missing were cases of Coca Cola sodas. When regaining consciousness, one Marine reported seeing a VC attempting to remove his boots with another standing over him pointing a AK-47. Marines were ordered to gather the dead VC and pile them into the back of a truck.

We gathered several, we were told they were going to take them to a landfill and burn the bodies. I picked up a VC who had been lying in the sun all morning. When I grabbed him by his legs, the skin appeared to stick on my hands. Through the years I never got over the sensation. That evening we manned the perimeter. Tensions were still high, we stayed on high alert and threw hand grenades over the side at any noise that was heard. The next morning at nearly daybreak, the listening post started to come into the line when one of the Marines was shot and killed. The whole mountain was still jittery, especially the top level. That day, we searched outside the wire for dead NVA/VC, weapons, or anything left behind by the attackers. Our squad went down the southern slope and western portion of the mountain. The western slope was steep and dense with trees and vegetation. If the enemy had wanted to eavesdrop on the Marines, they could have crawled almost to within 50 feet of the wire. The rest of our rotation at Nong Son was spent rebuilding the bunkers, perimeter wire and fields of fire. We were going to rebuild the bunkers better and stronger. We filled sandbags by day and manned the perimeter watch by night. After July 4th, no villagers were seen on any part of the mountain. The commercial business seemed to exist.

An Hoa Combat Base

We rotated back to An Hoa in late July and fell back into routine assignments. Patrols, perimeter watch, night ambushes and mine sweep security were all on the plate. Before Union II, I had not gotten close to any of the Marines in the company other than a few in my rifle squad. After the July 3rd-4th attacks at the coalmines we spent more time in our company area at An Hoa. We lived in tin-roofed, hard-back tents that we called "hooches". There were small groups that hung around together, and other Marines just enjoyed time for themselves. The one element that seemed to bring everyone together was music. Pop music and country music were the most popular. The music of the 1960s are now classics. Anyone that served in-country recalls their tour in the Nam and their buddies. I grew to be friends with men from Texas. L/Cpl Jesse Manciaz was from Plainview in the panhandle of the state. L/Cpl John Moreno was from Colorado City, west of Abilene. Doc Mauricio Aparicio was from El Paso and PFC King from Houston. PFC Chris Figueroa, with his Latino accent, was from Puerto Rico. Manciaz was the guy that brought us together. Kidding around and his smile kept the group loose. Manciaz's family would send him the latest Texas music from home and we would jam on Tejano (Texan) and country music.

During this time Cpl Daniel Yuetter from Philadelphia PA came back to the company. Yuetter had been wounded on Union II. He had been shot at close range by the NVA. The round had hit his M-60 machine gun belt he had on this chest, went into his chest. From there the projectile changed course and went out his right side and through his right arm. He sported one bullet scar on his chest and one on his arm above his elbow almost as if he had received a booster shot. He believed that nothing else would happen to him since he had already been shot. He was assigned to my squad. We both had a sense of humor and we liked doo-wop songs. He would ask about Texas and I likewise would ask him about Philly. Over a short time we got to talk about our families. In October we rotated back to the coalmines. During perimeter watch, outside the bunkers on the western slope, we smoked cigarettes and sang doo-wop. We talked about visiting each other families when we got back to "the world".

I still had five months of my "tour" left if you counted the 30-day trans-Pacific voyage. I had been all around hostile fire, sniper rounds getting close, explosive shrapnel flying back at me

and seeing others medevaced. Amazingly, I had not been wounded. Union II was where I had had time to think about “buying it”—a term we used for getting killed. While at the coalmines I had the opportunity to snap some pictures of the platoon. These would be a few of the pictures that made it back home. I carried an instamatic camera with me. The majority of the pictures I sent to be developed into slides. Once made, I kept these in the An Hoa hooch.

Cpl. Eddie Roberts had gotten ill at the coalmines. He had stopped taking his malaria pill and had told the squad that he was short; he wasn’t going back in the field. We didn’t have the opportunity to see him off, he had left while we were on work duty. The company rotated back to An Hoa. On October 25 or 26th the company was on a search and destroy sweep northwest of An Hoa. On the night of the 26th the company received small arms and rocket fire. Artillery was called in to a nearby village where it was believed the rocket fire had come from. The next morning, two squads and M-60 guns, were sent out to the village where the arty had impacted. L/Cpl King was point man, followed by Yuetter, myself, radio, Smitty, PFC Dominic, L/Cpl Manciaz, Doc Aparicio, Felix “Speedy” Gonzalez, L/Cpl David Wise from Grand Rapids, Michigan and M60 machine gunner, PFC Moreno. We had to zig zag through a series of rice paddies to get to the village that had received the in-coming rounds. On reaching the “vil”, we saw damaged tree tops, huts and impact craters on the ground. There were no villagers or dead VC at the site.

On our returned route we were cautioned about snipers firing from any tree line. About half way back to the company perimeter King climbed a knoll that connected to the ensuing rice paddy. King managed to climb up, but Yuetter was having trouble getting up. I ran over and placed my hands together for him to step on when I was blown backwards. I did not hear the blast, my eardrums had been blown. I landed on my back, feeling the warm water on my body; I thought out loud, “I’m dead”. I tried to struggle back up thinking, “I’m not dead”. I could not see. I went into shock. I felt people touching me and telling me to stay down, at the same time I was struggling to get up. I was desperate because I could not see. The corpsman bandaged me up, while a perimeter had been set for a medevac. I had been wounded. How bad? I did not know. While we waited for the medevac the Marines came over and placed Vietnamese money in my back pocket. PFC Dominic told me to tell the Corps not to send me back to Vietnam and Manciaz placed his crucifix that he wore in my back pocket. I could now hear the chopper but could not see it. I wondered who else had been wounded. The chopper lifted and I could hear heavy breathing next to me. When we got up to elevation I was shaking from being cold. The chopper landed and I was carried off in a stretcher, I could hear the medics working on me. There was a flashlight shined into my eye and I could see a distance blurred light. That afternoon King came to my stretcher and told me that he was going on a hospital ship and he didn’t have any money. I told him to get the money that was in my back pocket. I asked him about the others. Yuetter had been brought in but he did not know about his condition. I still was unable to see, King said thanks and good luck.

My medical evacuation from Vietnam began on October 31, 1967, leaving Danang by air on a military air hospital plane to Guam. I was bandaged like a mummy, from head to toe. Arriving at Guam, I was assisted up and taken to the bathroom. There I pulled the bandage away from my left eye and was able to see part of my hair, bandaged face, chest, arms and legs. I was assisted several more time while in Guam. It was in Guam that the doctor told me that I had lost my right eye. I couldn’t image losing my eye, when I looked in the mirror, it seemed that I was seeing with both eyes. I also suffered from superficial burns on my face with shrapnel wounds. There were large shrapnel scars on my right arm with powder burns. I had a large wound on my

right leg and numerous wounds peppered on the rest of my body. In Guam I was re-bandaged, but not as severe. A Marine officer came and pinned the Purple Heart medal on my pillow. While at Guam a Red Cross lady asked if I wanted to write a letter. I told her I had blurred vision and could not use my hand. She wrote the letter for me. The letter was to my mom letting her know that I was alright, not to worry about me.

On November 9th I was placed on a hospital military airplane on a flight to Andrews AFB in California. There was a layover in Hawaii and a Marine officer greeted me and thanked me for my service. We arrived at Andrews November 9th, still on a stretcher; I was taken to a hospital where we were able to make phone calls. I called my mom. She and my dad had gone out. I told my brother to tell them I was back in California I would call later. On November 10th, Marine Corps Birthday, I arrived at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego, CA. I would be there to recuperate from my injuries.

In a matter of weeks I was able to hobble around the ward. It was a ward for the ear, nose and eye section. Those of us that were war injuries looked weird with artificial ears, noses, eyes, etc. At the beginning I had a plug placed in my eye socket. It was an artificial eye without the pupil in it. We all got use to each other, but when we went out of the ward, everyone stared at us. I was promoted to corporal while at the hospital, so I was in charge of the bathroom detail. We also went to the movies on Fridays and to the recreation and day rooms to sit and watch TV or listen to music. I had begun to write letter home. The first I wrote was with real big letters. The doctor had taken pieces of shrapnel out of the left eye. My vision began improving but it was still blurry.

Sometime in February 1968 I was in the lobby of the hospital when I noticed the back of the head of L/Cpl John Muth. I yelled "Muth", and he turned around. I was glad to see someone from the Nam. I asked about everyone. Sgt. John Maloney was a KIA; Figueroa had been killed; he didn't know about Manciaz and Moreno. On and on. Muth stated that the NVA had overrun Hue City and the Fox Marines had been one of the companies sent in to retake the city. It was bad, he said, lots of Marines were KIA or WIA. Muth had been hit in Hue City. I finally asked if he had heard anything about Cpl. Daniel Yuetter. Muth told me Yuetter had died. He had died from his wounds on November 12, 1967. On a weekend Muth took me to meet his parents in San Diego. Years later Muth retired from the Corps as a Lieutenant Colonel.

My sea bags caught up with me at Balboa Naval Hospital. They had packed my belongings from An Hoa and there were my 100 slides of pictures I had taken from the time I spend in Vietnam. Later when I worked with unemployed veterans, I would tell them when asked how long I had served in the Marines. I would reply, "Long enough to mess up my medical records". By the end of February I was ready to be assigned to a VA hospital in Texas. My parents had told me that I would probably be moved to the naval hospital in Corpus Christi, by the gulf coast. Before I left San Diego I had left two of my three sea bags with a friend who was supposed to send the bags once I had an address to send them. When I called San Diego to give him my forwarding address, I was told that he had gone AWOL. My friend had been told that he had glaucoma and he was losing his sight. My sea bags with the photo slides were with him. On February 24th I was transferred to the VA hospital in Palo Alto, near San Francisco. When I arrived the doctor examined me and told me that he did not know why I had been transferred to Palo Alto. He stated that the hospital specialized in blindness and I was not blind. I had lost my right eye, but the left eye would recover, not to its full capacity as before, but non-the-less recover. I asked the doctor to see if he could get me a discharge from the Marines. I was not going to be accepted back in active duty. My leg injury had recovered to a point that I no longer

limped and my right arm was sore but functional. I kept myself busy during the time I spent in Palo Alto There was an Army soldier that been blinded by an explosion. I would wheel him out to the fresh air and sunlight and tell him he would do fine in “the real world”.

For over a month I continued to go down to the administration desk on an almost daily basis to check on my discharge papers. I had been before a review board and I was getting out. Finally on March 31st I received my orders and discharge from Treasure Island Naval Base. I was honorably discharged and placed on a temporary disability retired list (TDRL). I could be called back but it was unlikely. I was going home. On the evening of March 31, 1968 I sat in the dayroom of the VA hospital and listened to President Lyndon Johnson make the surprise announcement that he would not seek re-election. Three doctors that were standing listening to the speech were ridiculing the president and his remarks. I had fought for this. So people could have the freedom to disrespect our leaders. I was angry.

The next day I was taken back across the Golden Gate Bridge to the airport—the same bridge we sailed under after picking up the Army troops a year before. I was wearing my green Marine uniform for the first time since February. When I landed in Abilene I went home and took my uniform off, never to wear it again.

Five years later, I was visiting with a Disabled American Veterans counselor, when he noticed I had not been retired from the Marines. I received my retirement orders and certificate by mail. My retirement from the United States Marine Corps was effective April 1, 1973.

After 20 years of service in my civilian career I retired from the Texas Workforce Commission as Local Veteran Employment Representative September 30, 1999.

My Operations

Operation Newcastle, March 22-25, 1967

Operation Dixie, April 7-10, 1967

Operation Onslow, October 13-17, 1967

Operation Union May 2-12, 1967,

Operation Mountain Goat, May 18-20, 1967

Operation Calhoun, June 25-June 27, 1967

Operation Union II, May 27-June 3, 1967

Notes

Note 1: LtCol David B Brown, USMC (Ret.) and his daughter, Tiffany Brown Holmes, devoted a chapter to Gunny Jones, in their book *Battlelines*

Note 2: The battle of June 2, 1967 is well described in the book, *Battlelines*. In an article in the VFW magazine January 2005, unit veteran Patrick Haley is quoted as saying, “It is my understanding that this is one of the highest number of casualties sustained by one U.S. rifle company in any one-day engagement during the Vietnam War”.

Cpl. Mike P. Hernandez, USMC (Ret.)

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